

Never let a good crisis go to waste

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Published in an edited version with a silly title on the 25th of December
2021

<https://bit.ly/3yYkC1R>

There is a moment when a never-ending crisis turns into a way of life. This seems to be the case with the present pandemic. If so, it might be wise to explore the permanent condition in which it has left the polity. One obvious lesson is that societies have to learn once again to live with microbes, just as they had learned to do when those little bugs were made visible by Pasteur's and Koch's discoveries.

But bacteriology and medicine were concerned with only one aspect of microbial life. It turns out that if you add to the results of medicine those of the various sciences of the earth system, another aspect of viruses and bacteria comes to the fore: during the long geochemical history of the earth the microbes, together with fungi and plants, have been essential, and are still essential, to the very composition of the environment in which we humans live. To the point that living beings are not strictly speaking *inside* an environment to which they would have no other choice but to adapt; rather they have engineered their environment, albeit blindly, into more favorable conditions for one another.

So the present pandemic might offer two lessons, one about surviving with viruses and bacteria at the micro level, and another one about recognizing, this time at the macro level, the role of living beings in creating the world in which we humans have to survive. The first lesson comes from biology; the second, from geoscience. The two combined offer the victims of the pandemic a moment of recognition: at the smallest level just as much as at the biggest, the new condition means that we will never escape the invasive presence of living beings, entangled as we are with other living beings that react to our actions. If they mutate we have to mutate as well.

This is the reason why the many national lockdowns—imposed on their citizens to survive the Covid virus—offer such a powerful analogy with the Great Lockdown in which humanity finds itself detained for good.

Lockdown was painful enough, yet many ways have been found, thanks in part to vaccination, to allow people to resume a semblance of normal life. But there is no possibility of such a resumption if you consider that all living forms are locked down for good inside the limits of the earth. And by “earth” I don't mean the planet as it can be seen from space, but its very superficial

pellicle, only a few miles thick, that has been transformed into an habitable milieu by the eons long labor of life forms.

This thin matrix that geochemists call the “critical zone” is not as small as the house in which so many of us had to wait until we were allowed to go outside, but it is much more cramped because it has no outside! Only in dreams could a spaceship on its way to Mars escape not only from the earth’s gravity but also from its umbilical link to earth. As young activists shout: “There is no planet B”. What the covid crisis allowed us to understand is that there is a powerful analogy between the smaller and more provisional medical lockdown and the much larger but definitive Great Lockdown.

If we have been made aware of the agency of viruses in shaping our social relations, how much more important is the realization that our social relations will be molded forever by the quick reaction of ecosystems that are rapidly modified by our actions. The feeling that we live in a new space appears again at the local as well as the global level. Why would all nations convene in Glasgow to keep temperature below some agreed upon limit, if they did not have the sensation that a huge lid has been put over their territory? When you look up at the blue sky, are you not aware that you are now under some sort of dome inside which you are locked?

Gone is the infinite space; now you are responsible for the safety of this overbearing dome as much as you are for your own health and wealth. It weighs on you, body and soul. Such a curvature of space is the great “bonus” of the lockdown: at last we know where we are and with which fellow creatures we will have to survive. And we realize that we will never escape from the vagaries of their mutations. To survive under this new condition we have to undergo a sort of metamorphosis.

This is where politics enters. It is very difficult for most people used to the industrialized way of life with its dream of infinite space and its insistence on emancipation and development, to suddenly sense that it is instead enveloped, confined, tucked inside a closed space where their concerns have to be shared with new entities; other people of course, but also viruses, soils, coal, oil, water, and, worst of all, this damned, constantly shifting climate...

People are rightly disoriented by what amounts to a shift in cosmology which can be summarized by the phrase “from infinite space back to limited cosmos”. It is not farfetched to consider that such a shift is the hidden source of the present division of the polity. Although the sentence “you and I don’t live on the same planet” used to be a joking expression of dissent, it has become literally true and is no longer funny: we do live on different planets, and they are at war with one another.

This is why it is important not to misconstrue the political conundrum implied by this cosmological shift. It is of the same magnitude as when, from the 17th century onward, Westerners had to shift from the closed cosmos of the past to the infinite space of the modern period. As the cosmos opened, political institutions had to be invented to cope with the new modernizing utopia. Now in reverse, the same task falls to present generations that this time have to land on earth: what new political institutions could cope with people so divided that they belong to different planets? It would be a mistake to believe that the pandemic is a crisis that will end instead of the perfect warning for what is coming, what I call the new climatic regime. It appears that all the resources of science, humanities and the arts have to be mobilized once again to shift attention from the *human* to the *terrestrial* condition.

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